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RODIN: TRUTH, FORM, LIFE: Selections from
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Fall 2019

RODIN: TRUTH, FORM, LIFE Selections from the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Collections Sculpture Rewall Panel

Fairfield University Art Museum

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Rodin received the commission to design the *Monument to Balzac* in 1891 from the Committee of the Société des Gens de Lettres de France (Society of Men of Letters of France). Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850) was one of the most famous authors of the 19th-century. He was best known for his series of stories and novels titled *La Comédie humaine* (*The Human Comedy*), which presented a panorama of French life in the years after the 1815 fall of Napoleon Bonaparte. Balzac's characters were complicated and often ambiguous, and were written with a new realism that influenced writers like Marcel Proust, Charles Dickens, and Fyodor Dostoyevsky, as well as modern writers like William Faulkner, Jack Kerouac, and Italo Calvino.

Over the course of seven years, Rodin made more than fifty preliminary studies for the monument. Rather than basing it on Balzac's physical appearance, Rodin's conception for the sculpture was based on the power of Balzac's writing, saying, "I want him immense, a dominator, a creator of the world." In 1898, Rodin exhibited a full-size plaster model of the finished *Monument*, but his decision to stray from a naturalistic portrait sparked public controversy, and the model was rejected. Rodin moved it to his home in Meudon. Embittered by the experience, he never took on such a monumental project again. The *Monument* was never cast in bronze during his lifetime.

This photograph shows the 1968 authorized posthumous cast of the *Monument* (117 inches high x 47 wide x 47 deep), which in 1986 was donated by its owners, Iris and B. Gerald Cantor, to the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and marks the main entrance to the Museum.

The *Burghers of Calais* was commissioned by the French port city of Calais in 1884 to commemorate the 500th anniversary of an event that occurred during the Hundred Years' War (1337-1453). In 1347, King Edward III of England laid siege to Calais, and for 100 days no food was allowed to enter the city. The king offered to end the siege only if citizens, or "burghers," would bring him the keys to the city's medieval gates and then be executed. Six men volunteered (though they would ultimately be saved from execution by the intervention of Edward's wife, Queen Philippa of Hainault).

Rodin's design for the sculpture shows the burghers slightly larger than life-size, barefoot and wearing sackcloth. Instead of depicting the men as courageous and selfless, Rodin showed each at the moment he realized the limit of his own resolve for self-sacrifice, with each man's individual response to his plight made evident by his unique emotional pose and gestures. At the time, the idea that art could commemorate – even celebrate – heroism in defeat was revolutionary. After the monument was completed to great acclaim, Rodin continued to work with the richness of possibilities offered by these figures, creating enlargements and reductions of the figures and parts of the figures, like the hands and heads. He also incorporated parts of the figures into other compositions.

The *Gates of Hell* (1880-ca.1900) was Rodin's most ambitious commission. Originally conceived to be the entrance portal for a new museum of decorative arts in Paris, *The Gates of Hell* featured hundreds of figures modeled in low relief, high relief, and fully in the round. Rodin took inspiration for his imagery from Dante's 1307 *Divina Commedia* (*Divine Comedy*), the tale of a journey through Hell and Purgatory to Paradise, as well as from Charles Baudelaire's 1857 *Les Fleurs du mal* (*The Flowers of Evil*), a book of poetry that examines complex and often morbid emotional states. The original visual model for the doors was a long-standing tradition for sculpted church doors with narrative scenes organized into compartments, like Lorenzo Ghiberti's *Gates of Paradise* (1425-52) for the Baptistery in Florence. Ultimately, Rodin abandoned using this type of formal structure in favor of a unified composition in which the figures of tormented souls float in a surging sea of fire, representing the suffering of mankind.

When *The Gates of Hell* was almost completed and ready to be cast, the French government canceled the commission in favor of funding a new train station, the Gare d'Orsay, on the site of the proposed museum. Rodin removed many of the nearly three-dimensional figures from *The Gates* and made them available instead as independent sculptures. Several of Rodin's most popular bronzes were once part of *The Gates*, including *The Thinker*, *The Kiss*, and *The Three Shades*. The experience of reworking this cancelled commission seems to have taught Rodin the myriad possibilities of reimagining, reusing and renaming fragments of sculpture as either independent pieces, or as parts to be united with other parts to create new wholes.

The complete *Gates of Hell* was never cast during Rodin's lifetime. After his death it was finally cast in bronze, though not in his preferred method of *cire perdue* or "lost wax," but rather through a method known as "sandcasting." The first lost wax cast of *The Gates of Hell* was made in 1979. It was commissioned by Iris and B. Gerald Cantor and subsequently donated to the Iris and B. Gerald Cantor Center for the Visual Arts at Stanford University. Today this massive piece (21 feet high and 12 feet wide) is the centerpiece of Stanford's B. Gerald Cantor Rodin Sculpture Garden.